

NEWS IN BRIEF

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE “NATURAL HOLY PLACES IN ARCHAEOLOGY AND FOLKLORE IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION”

On 2–4 May 2008, the international conference on natural holy places was jointly held by the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore and the public agency Vita Antiqua in Kernavė, Lithuania. The discussion on natural holy places which was initiated by Estonian archaeologists and folklorists in 2007 had moved from Tartu to Kernavė. Geographically, the forum had expanded with researchers from Belarus, Russia, Poland, and Germany and the number of conference participants had increased. Besides archaeology and folklore, disciplines such as history of religion and environmental archaeology were represented.

The presentations focused on the variety and typology of natural holy places, research experience, and the current situation of the research in these countries. Some research projects were presented as well. In addition to the general discussion by Tõnno Jonuks (Tartu, Estonia), the most important point revealed at the conference was that natural holy places in the Baltic area are extremely similar in character and researchers have to tackle the same problems while learning more about these. This became the key inspiration and at the same time formed the foundation for discussion about concepts and terminology about natural holy places, methodology, and interpretation of data.

Interaction between archaeology and folklore in the research of natural holy places was presented and discussed in many conference papers. Place legends about natural holy places are known in all countries, although in different ways. The most common questions related to this phenomenon are the origins of motifs, their dating, and sources.

Some presentations in which the analysis was based on folklore material deserve to be separately mentioned. Anna Wickholm (Helsinki, Finland) overviewed the holy wells of South and West Finland. The motif of hidden treasures is particularly prevalent in these legends. Often the idea is reflected in place names, as, for example, Golden Well. It is believed that at full moon, treasures can be seen but they are available for sincere men only.

Tõnno Jonuks discussed the natural holy places of Northeast Estonia, where the most traditional type is represented by woodland hills surrounded by arable fields. These are marked by ancient sacral name, *hiis*, and numerous place legends, the most remarkable of which relate the character of pre-Christian rituals to researchers. Next to an accurate description of what used to be sacrificed at *hiis* sites and when, Jonuks discussed legends that are characteristic of mythological places, where violation of certain rules led to punishment.

Sandis Laime (Riga, Latvia) discussed the results of interdisciplinary research which focuses on mythological beings called *raganas*. Outside villages and single farmsteads, *raganas* like to appear on tops of hills, in the woods, nearby rivers and ponds,

the names of which are sometimes characteristic of natural holy places as well (e.g., *Raganu grava* and *Veļupīte*). Usually *raganas* are seen bathing, combing their hair, singing or dancing, but they are very afraid of thunder and wolves. Relying on data recorded in North Vidzeme, Laime concluded that the character of the *raganas* corresponds to one of the souls of the dead. In terms of her name and concept, *ragana* might be explained as someone who is seen by others instead of her being able to see the surrounding beings herself (which used to be a previously prevalent explanation).

Marge Konsa (Tartu, Estonia) presented data obtained in the course of the project in which folklore and archaeological data connected with lakes were analysed, compared, and merged for further research. In the framework of this project, lakes about which place legends are available were identified, the dominant motifs of dwellings and churches sunk in these lakes and archaeological sites in the surroundings were listed. There is no doubt that the abovementioned lakes and prehistoric burial sites are connected. From a topographical point of view, burial sites are located directly on lakeshore or sometimes at a certain distance from it while the most important factor, the visual connection with the lake, was preserved. The next task of the project will be to carry out special underwater research.

Juris Urtāns (Riga, Latvia) introduced an alternative practice of lake exploration in Southeast Latvia, combining the analysis of folklore texts, landscape archaeology, and aerial photography. This has led to the discovery of some new important points –



Participants of the conference. Photo by Vykintas Vaitkevičius 2008.

the link between a lake's shape and its name, and between former and present-day location of the lake (according to place legends, lakes are travelling beings).

Aleksiej Dziermant (Minsk, Belarus) presented a mysterious group of sacred stones that are regarded as shoemakers (*шаўцы*) and tailors (*краўцы*). According to this motif, people used to bring material to the stone, asking it to make boots or sew clothes. The distribution of the natural holy places of this kind does correlate with the area of Striated Ware Culture on the territory of present-day Belarus and Lithuania from the 2nd millennium BC to the 3rd and 4th century AD. According to Dziermant, the abovementioned stones might be interpreted as cult places, and the use of the stones has continued even to the historical times.

Vykintas Vaitkevičius (Klaipėda, Lithuania) drew attention to the local peculiarities of the motifs of Lithuanian place legends: namely, 'to burn sacrifice (somewhere)' and 'to constantly burn holy fire (somewhere)'. The key distribution area of these motifs covers the Samogitia region in western Lithuania and overlaps with the area of prehistoric natural holy places called *Alkos kalnai* ('Alka Hill'). The second, more isolated area of the above motifs covers the Utena Land in East Lithuania and concerns hillforts that were sometimes used during the 1st millennium BC – 1st millennium AD.

The conference participants were also introduced to some natural holy places in the environs of Kernavė and Vilnius. The creative folklore group Sedula provided entertainment in the conference's cultural programme, and Ms Beatričė Laurinkutė presented a special art installation "Wells in the Baltic Culture".

In 2009, the conference on natural holy places in the Baltic Sea region will be held in Turaida and organized by the Latvian Academy of Culture.

Vykintas Vaitkevičius

THE SECOND SEMINAR OF ESTONIAN AND LITHUANIAN FOLKLORISTS: "TRADITIONS AND INNOVATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY 2"

On the last days of September in 2008, the Department of Folkloristics at the Estonian Literary Museum welcomed colleagues from the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore. Two years before, the Estonian folklorists had visited the Institute in Vilnius where Lithuanian colleagues introduced their research activities and hosted the first joint seminar in the series "Traditions and Innovations in Contemporary Society".

While the first seminar had been based mainly on the papers of Estonian folklorists, on the second seminar seven out of ten papers were delivered by Lithuanian folklorists, who introduced the current situation in Lithuanian folkloristics and the main projects carried out at the institute. Estonian folklorists discussed the recent